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ABSTRACT

Composition instructors are particularly interested in the fact that hypertext, as the mode of discourse that computers promote and prefer, introduces a new problematic for those concerned with teaching critical thinking. What kind of discourse is hypertext, and to what extent does it encourage, enable and demand critical thinking? The issue is not strictly about a computer technology, but a way of writing and a way of reading. To think about hypertext's nature as discourse, for example, consider Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory as a guide in his "Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning." Ricoeur bases d.scourse analysis on the distinction between semantics and semiotics. His approach to interpretation theory makes it possible to see how critical thinking remains possible and necessary, but in important respects, changed in the hypertext environment. Considered as discourse, hypertext is closer to writing than to speech and so presents the tasks of literary interpretation and criticism. If hypertext remains in a sense "text," then the reading skills that are required still bear a relation to those that print requires. It is the larger structures that hypertext radically transforms. It is the "link," a particular kind of transition, that seems to characterize hypertext as a genre; the invitation is to explore a world that exists not simply in front and behind but offers paths in many directions. Hypertext encourages exploratory, multilinear writing rather than polemical writing. (CR)

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["HyperDiscourse: Just What Are We Thinking?"]

What Kind of Discourse?: Thinking It Through

My word processor, like those used by my students, wants me to believe that I'm typing onto a page of typewriter paper. Through the window of my computer screen, I can see about half of that piece of paper, and by scrolling up or down I can see text that appears to be "above" or "below" it. The software wants to preserve the illusion of typewriter paper and printed text. But this of course is a slightly perverse way to use a computer: if I had writing software that insisted that a computer is a computer and not a typewriter, I would be linking together word-structures and probably images the size of my computer screen or smaller. I would still be constructing sentences, and probably paragraphs. But all units larger than the paragraph would be radically transformed. I could still create works, of course -- essays and narratives -- and I could still control the order in which my chunks of text and images were read. But I could also throw the work open: I could incorporate a plurality of argument-threads or narrative-threads such that the reader's experience depends on her own choices as she makes her way through the links. I could invite others to interpolate their own chunks into my work. And I could update my work as often as I liked, in response to readers or my own whims.

This concept is of course familiar to anyone who's ever encountered hypertext on the Web or anywhere else -- which is

ED 418 406

CS 216172

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pretty much everyone. But I'm starting from the obvious and familiar in order to make it easier to define what we mean by hypertext, and to conceptualize this mode of discourse. If computers preserve the notion that written works have unilinear arguments or narratives only by clumsily indulging the writer's nostalgia for the typewriter, then perhaps what the prognosticators are saying is true: we may be already well on our way towards abandoning this notion.

As composition instructors, we're particularly interested in the fact that hypertext, as the mode of discourse that computers promote and prefer, introduces a new problematic for those of us concerned with teaching critical thinking. When we ask students to revise a paper in order to look more carefully at its reasoning, analysis, or terms, we are usually working from our familiarity with "linear texts" -- the uninterrupted, continuous arguments that the printed page requires. When it comes to *hypertext*, we are on less comfortable ground. We seem to have no hypertext literary tradition, few hypertext genres to use as models. This situation urges us to ask: what kind of discourse *is* hypertext, and to what extent does it encourage, enable and demand critical thinking? Alternatively, might the need for students to learn the skills that fall under the critical thinking rubric require new ways of using hypertext? Must the notion of critical thinking be *completely* reformulated, -- or merely adapted to suit this new environment? What exactly do we mean by "critical thinking," anyway?

Although I can't fully address all these questions in the time available, my task is to lay some groundwork for the two papers that follow by exploring the nature of hypertext as discourse. It may be helpful to begin by suggesting that what we're really talking about here is not strictly a computer technology, but a way of writing and a way of reading. Just as computers do a passable imitation of a typewriter, and are able to display conventional unilinear structures, so printed pages can display hypertext, can contain hypertextual elements like footnotes and indexes, or visuals that stand in a hypertext-like relationship to the text. The printed page encourages unilinear discourse, while computers encourage hypertextuality, but each can pantomime the other.

In order to think through the question of hypertext's nature as discourse, I propose to use Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory as a guide, in particular his book, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, which expands on some lectures he gave at Texas Christian University in 1973. Why Ricoeur? My motive lies in the fact that he bases discourse analysis on the distinction between semantics and semiotics. Language considered as discourse is language considered not as a synchronic system of signs, but language considered as predicative, the vehicle of meaning by which someone says something to someone about something. Discourse, he says on page 1, reaching all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, "requires two basic signs -- a noun and

a verb -- which are connected in a synthesis which goes beyond the words." (1) The sentence (I'll briefly quote):

> is not a larger or more complex word, it is a new entity. It may be decomposed into words, but the words are something other than short sentences. A sentence is a whole irreducible to the sum of its parts. It is made up of words, but it is not a derivative function of its words. A sentence is made up of signs, but it is not itself a sign. (7)

This distinct entity, the sentence, requires a different description, a different science, as it were, from the sign: it requires semantics rather than semiotics.

The point of this, as concerns hypertext, is to remind us that hypertext still relies on sentences in order to convey meaning. I don't mean merely that in practice sentences occur in most hypertext documents. I mean that to the extent that hypertext documents are the bearers of meaning, and hence to the extent that it makes sense to say one "reads" hypertext or "writes" hypertext, then it is due to the fact that signs -- words, images, ideograms, and so on -- can be combined into sentences or predicative, sentence-like structures. So it makes sense, I think, to speak of "hyperdiscourse" and to try to describe its characteristics. Already, this observation puts our inquiry on a different footing from some recent theoretical approaches. By suggesting that hypertext presents the reader with sentences and larger literary or quasi-literary structures, and not

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just a network of signs, we're taking a hermeneutic approach to hypertext rather than a deconstructive one. As I'll argue a little later, critical thinking is a component or aspect of interpretation, and Ricoeur's approach to interpretation theory, I think, makes it possible to see how critical thinking remains possible and necessary, but still, in important respects, *changed* in the hypertext environment.

Moreover, considered as discourse, it is clear that hypertext is closer to *writing* than to speech, and so it presents the tasks of literary interpretation and criticism. True, as Walter Ong and others have pointed out, hypertext does introduce elements of orality -- for example, it more readily accommodates collaborative dialogue rather than imposing fixed roles on reader and writer. But even collaboration and dialogue are directed to the creation of an artifact that is inscribed, in the sense that hypertext expressions outlast the event of meaning in a moment's utterance. The message becomes fixed, exteriorized in material marks that are no longer tied to the immediate voice and gesture of a human speaker. My point is that when hypertext is the medium rather than the printed page, the act of communication and the hermeneutic situation is transformed *somewhat* -- but not as radically transformed as it is when we turn from speaking to writing. We are still dealing with *essentially* the same hermeneutic situation, the same familiar problematic. By becoming fixed in writing, the message takes on what Ricoeur calls "semantic autonomy": the meaning of the

message is no longer what the speaker meant, it is what the *statement* means, the words and sentences that have been inscribed as text. As Ricoeur puts it, the "author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide." (29) So interpretation is still required and it does not simply mean the divining of the author's intention as a psychological object: the detachment from the utterer, the release of the text from simply "what the speaker intended" is what makes critical reading necessary. If hypertext remains in this sense "text," then the reading skills that are required still bear a relation to those that print requires.

These are important reference points to help us position hypertext as discourse. But if the word and the sentence remain in hypertext essentially what they were on the printed page, it is the larger structures that hypertext radically transforms. Just as the sentence represents a new entity irreducible to its component words, so written texts bring into being "organic wholes irreducible to a mere addition of sentences," (32) namely genres, literary texts generated according to recognizable rules and conventions. Hypertext differs from print chiefly by introducing new genres, but these genres remain "works." Like other forms of literature, they are not just uttered but at least to some extent crafted, constructed. In this way too, then, hypertext documents resemble printed documents and require related interpretive skills on the part of the reader. At this point

in the evolution of hypertext as a medium, it may be impossible to predict exactly what new genres it will *eventually* produce. But although we can't speculate on what will become of hypertext as the technology evolves, it is possible to consider what differences ensue from the multilinear nature of the hypertext document.

It's the "link," a particular kind of transition, that seems to characterize hypertext as a genre or group of genres. But it seems to me that "links" in hypertext are quite different from the links that connect ideas on the printed page or express transitions in a linear argument. The latter are logical links, expressed by such familiar transitional words and phrases as "therefore," "however," "but" and so on. But in hypertext, the link itself is frequently mute, and rarely more than a single word, for example "next" or "index." So the hypertext link offers the reader a mere juxtaposition, or to borrow a nicely precise phrase from F. N. Robinson's book on *Beowulf*, a "paratactic apposition." This term refers to the method by which meaning is built up by juxtaposing passages that at first appear to be merely "digressions." Such juxtapositions are, I think, essentially hypertextual. But hypertext, instead of offering only one paratactic apposition at a time, often offers a plurality, a variety of "threads." It is sometimes said that hypertext is *non-linear*, but this seems to be precisely true only in the most anarchic boundary cases. Most hypertext is multilinear. But it may be the case that making meaning out

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of the paratactic appositions of hypertext requires more sophistication and experience on the part of the reader than does conventional linear argument or narrative.

A genre is a generative device, but it also makes a certain promise to the reader by raising certain expectations. What qualities distinguish a hypertext document as fulfilling the genre's potential? "Good" hypertext satisfies by being rich and suggestive rather than being compellingly persuasive. Perhaps ideally in hypertext everything is linked somehow to everything else. And since there can be so many paths for the reader to explore, hypertext design is perhaps analogous to landscaping or park design, with more emphasis on pleasant surprises than on a single, irresistable narrative or argument. Moreover, text becomes spatialized, as it tends to in lyric poems. We become more aware of the visual appearance of each hypertext element. The reader of hypertext is invited to *explore* a circumambient world that exists not simply in front and behind but offers paths in many directions.

For these reasons, hypertext perhaps lends itself less to familar fiction and non-fiction genres that have been so shaped by the requirements of the printed page, than to a genre that Northrop Frye called the Menippean Satire or anatomy -- not a satire in the ordinary sense, but a work that, as he defines it, "presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern" (Examples: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Burton's

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Anatomy of Melancholy; Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*; Walton's *The Compleat Angler*) In their long form, they tend toward the encyclopedic; in the short form, toward the dialogue or colloquy. In these works, the sequence of ideas is not important. It's the world that's created, in which you can move about more or less at will. So perhaps we should look to works in this genre to teach us about the literary potential of hypertext.

But even if hypertext tends to construct a virtual world for the reader, it remains true that, as Ricoeur contends, "discourse cannot fail to be about something" -- and this remains true of hyperdiscourse. As a result the problematic of reference -- of what the text (including the metaphorical, symbolic, poetical text) claims to be true -- persists. Ricoeur contends that it is this reference that represents the real goal of interpretation: not to figure out simply what the author meant, but to figure out what the text means for me, what possibilities it projects. What role does critical thinking play in the full work of interpretation?

At this point we need a working definition -- or at least description -- of what we mean by "critical thinking." All reading begins with an intuitive grasping at the surface-level meaning, but what needs to happen beyond that in order to produce a critical interpretation? Ricoeur's interpretation theory is useful for describing the process in a way that does justice to a wide range of approaches to criticism and interpretation. Interpretation as described by

Paul Ricoeur involves three moments: firstly, this naive reading, which we arrive at through a mere "intuitive grasping" of what the writer intends; secondly, a critique, which we arrive at by bringing our assumptions and the text's assumptions into question, frequently guided by a critical frame, a formalist or structuralist or post-structuralist approach. This may simply involve an attentiveness to the rhetorical structures in a text, or it may involve an elaborate hermeneutics of suspicion, such as deconstruction or a Marxist or psychoanalytic critique would prescribe. But it is at this stage that we introduce method and no longer rely on intuition alone. However, and I think this is particularly true in the composition classroom, interpretation does not really rest there. There is a third moment, one that moves beyond structuralist or post-structuralist critique toward a higher comprehension. Ricoeur calls this a "second naïveté," but he means this in a positive sense, because this is an existential moment, in which we "appropriate" meaning by making decisions about what the text "means" for us, what it suggests for me in my own world, apart from merely what the author meant in her or his world. Ricoeur writes:

> What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. In other words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other

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> than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text. (92)

The text is understood to disclose "a possible way of looking at things" but we are no longer looking behind the text for something like the writer's intention (92). So this higher level comprehension is the final moment along a hermeneutical arc that begins in intuitive grasping, proceeds by way of structural analysis and issues in critical interpretation.

I find encouragement for this way of looking at critical thinking in Bartholomae and Petrosky's introduction to *Ways of Reading*. Their account of the work of critical reading seems to be consistent with widely accepted ideas. Bartholomae and Petrosky describe two complementary modes of reading: reading with the grain and reading against the grain. A certain principle of charity applies to the work of reading: we always begin by reading with the grain. But in order to get beneath the surface, we need to read against the grain. If we complete our work as readers, however, we return from this adventure in order to try reading with the grain once more, sympathetic to the text's purpose but not beguiled by it. So I think such a double-approach to reading guides students in basically the same direction that Ricoeur has in view. Students who are able to read both with the grain of the argument and against it, and then able in their writing to hazard a third step in which they construct the text as a complex but semantically rich web of intersecting forces, have succeeded in becoming critical thinkers.

Does this help us to close in on the consequences for critical thinking that hypertext entails? In the classroom, it seems to me, the conventional *printed* texts that "work" best to promote critical thinking have many of the qualities of hypertext and may even tend in the direction of hypertext. They tend not to give a strong sense of closure; they tend to be less explanatory than exploratory. Many do make compelling arguments but they don't pretend to have all the answers: they make arguments that seem to have challenged the writer's own resources no less than the reader's; we sense that the writer has been reaching to extend his or her grasp, discovering what can be said in the very process of making an argument. They seem to engage in their own genuine struggle to understand their subject, to work something out in such a way that the reader can join in the struggle and share in the excitement. An exploratory essay or fiction of this kind keeps drawing us back into itself, and from each reading we learn more, as we begin to see more deeply into its internal coherence and its external ramifications. Its difficulty seems to be a necessary difficulty, a difficulty that would be there for any reader, however sophisticated, by virtue of the nature of the inquiry itself.

Such readings bear the marks of multilinearity even while they have been shaped for the printed page. This suggests to me that hypertext and critical thinking can go hand in hand when conceived in the right way. The hypertext author, instead of seeking a linear argument, would have to

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persistently resist closure, to keep the exploration open and flowing.

Thinking, as we know, does not start out as unilinear. At what point in the process does a writer's thinking become cast into the unilinear form that the printed page requires or at least prefers? Frequently, perhaps, not until quite late in the process, when the writer settles on just one of several possible lines of argument. The writer chooses a single line of argument and organizes its elements into a single arrangement in order to make it meet the requirements of the printed page. If the writer were to gather and generate ideas in the usual way but never reduce them to a single line of argument and a single arrangement, and then if the writer were to give expression to all these interconnected ideas at once in hypertext, preserving all the connections and lack of connections, would an essential lesson be lost? The hypertext version would be inconclusive, exploratory, venturesome, perhaps more like a meditation than an argument. If the polemical element were there at all, it would probably be less assertive. Hypertext, it seems, encourages exploratory, multilinear writing rather than polemical writing. But as writing, such explorations still present readers with meaningful statements about the world and not just a closed system of linked signs, and so, I would suggest, potentially present students with the full range of interpretive and critical thinking tasks.

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